

Missing-Uranium Report Withheld

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The CIA and the FBI have blocked the public release of a General Accounting Office report on a mystery-shrouded case of missing bomb-grade uranium.

The nation's two most powerful investigative agencies ordered the GAO report — finished last week — to be kept secret even though GAO investigators, after more than a year of interviewing witnesses and digging into the documentary remains of the 13-year-old case, were never given access to sensitive CIA and FBI files on the matter.

In a letter sent yesterday to Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats, the chairman of the House Commerce subcommittee that had requested the GAO probe, Rep. John D. Dingell, D-Mich., charged there are now "widespread suspicions of a government cover-up of either a real or a feared diversion" and that "full public disclosure" is needed to put the matter to rest.

The most sensitive aspects of the case appear to revolve around either suspicions or evidence held by the CIA that in the 1960s highly enriched uranium somehow found its way from a private company in Apollo, Pa., to Israel, where it became part of the first atomic bombs in that nation's nuclear weapons program. (Israel repeatedly has denied that it has a nuclear weapons program.)

THE GOVERNMENT first began to suspect that something strange had happened at the company, Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corp. (NUMEC), when the firm reported that a large amount of uranium was missing from one of its fuel fabrication contracts. Investigators later concluded that 208 pounds of the uranium, roughly enough for 10 small nuclear weapons, had disappeared.

At the time NUMEC was headed by a former Atomic Energy Commission chemist, Dr. Zalman M. Shapiro, who had a number of busi-

ness dealings with the Israeli Atomic Energy Agency. Shapiro has insisted that the missing uranium was lost in various waste processes at the plant.

During the early 1960s, according to documents obtained by investigators, Shapiro repeatedly was reprimanded by the AEC and the U.S. Navy for lax security practices that tended to allow too much access by foreign visitors at the plant, including French and Israeli scientists. The plant housed government bomb-grade uranium and plutonium as well as a library of classified nuclear weapons data.

However, according to Howard Brown, the main AEC investigator of NUMEC, the government was never able to find sufficient evidence that Shapiro was involved in any illegal activity.

Asked how he feels about the continuing activities of the FBI and the CIA in the case, Brown, now a private attorney in Washington, said he believes their stand is becoming unfair. "The executive branch is the only agency capable of putting this matter to rest once and for all. If they have a case they should bring it. If they don't they should admit it."

THE FBI AND THE Justice Department have been in and out of the NUMEC case since 1968, when the CIA first reported its suspicions about NUMEC and Israel to then-President Lyndon Johnson.

Their latest entry into the case came in 1976 when the matter resurfaced at the Nuclear Regulatory Agency, the successor agency to the AEC. At that point President Gerald Ford asked that the case be reinvestigated.

Since then the FBI has refused to provide information on the case to congressional committees or the GAO on the basis that it would interfere with its investigation. Dingell, in his letter to Staats, said that the FBI's position "stretches one's imagination."

Dingell asserted that after 30 months of investigation the FBI has "still not interviewed some of the central actors involved."

Asked about the NUMEC case, a spokesman for the Justice Department said that while the investigation is "inactive," the case is open. A CIA spokesman said that the agency directed the GAO on Oct. 25 not to release any part of its report on NUMEC. The reason for the report's secrecy classification, the CIA spokesman said, is classified.

Shapiro's lawyer, Abe Krash, could not be reached for comment. Krash and other lawyers from his firm, Arnold & Porter, have recently interviewed a number of former government officials in-

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